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VETERAN N.Y.C. MESSENGER IS WHEEL TROUBLE

By CHRIS ERIKSON

October 5, 2006 -- MAYBE you've seen him rocketing up the avenue on his battered bike, packages in tow, surfing on the back of a speeding truck in death-defying fashion. Maybe he's brought a delivery to your office, looking, with his tattoos, helmet and elbow pads, like a cross between Keith Richards, a Bowery Boy and a bike-riding cartoon superhero.

He goes by the name Kamikaze, and after 25 years in the saddle, 15 stolen bikes, thousands of packages delivered and too many accidents and altercations to count, he's a legend among city bike messengers (and a well-known scourge to traffic cops and cab drivers).

This weekend at the Coney Island Film Festival, the 50-year-old Flushing native will get a moment in the spotlight, with the screening of the documentary short "Messenger," by city filmmaker and photographer Gary Beeber. We checked in with Kamikaze for some tales from the trenches.

On his fastest run: "I started from Van Dam and went up to 90th Street - I got up there in 20 minutes, and made it back in 15, so it was 35 minutes round-trip. I clipped onto a van and went up the West Side Highway, and then I broke off and the rest was all riding. That's how I got the name Kamikaze. My dispatcher gave me the name. He couldn't believe it."

On cab drivers: "The cabbies know me; there's always words with them. We always go at it. The buses are crazy, too. They love to swing their nose out in front of you. I'll stand on my bike and bust his mirror as I go by, so he's gonna have a problem pulling out now."

On car-surfing: "You gotta start off on trucks to get the feel of the speed. You gotta wear leather gloves, or you can slice your fingers right off. You gotta watch what you're doing, because the gap between the cars can come out at you and shut you right down."

On his closest brush with death: "I'm coming around Columbus Circle. The gap [between the cars] was wide open, and when I came around the turn all of a sudden everything just closed up on me. There was a tractor trailer next to me, so I threw my bike and grabbed onto the handle on the back of the trailer, and I pulled myself up while my bike got ran over."

On the job: "Thing I love about it is, you have no boss on your back, and you can take any break you want. Out here, you're free."